



World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

PROGRAMME: No. 747 recorded 5 May 1999

GUEST: Catherine Bertini
Executive Director
World Food Programme
United Nations

JOURNALISTS: Judith Miller, New York Times
Evgueni Menkes, RIA "Novosti"

MODERATOR: Ian Williams

WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME

One of the most basic rights that people are still denied is the right to food. Hunger claims many victims among the poor; women and children being the hardest hit. It is estimated that fifty percent of disease-related mortality among infants could be avoided if infant malnutrition was eradicated. The World Food Programme, established in 1963 with headquarters in Rome, is the world's largest international food aid organization. In this edition of **World Chronicle**, Catherine Bertini, Executive Director of World Food Programme, discusses current food emergencies afflicting millions of people worldwide.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration: 28:00"
Executive Producer: Chaim Litewski
Director: Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant: Corazon A. Icasas

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

WILLIAMS: Hello, I'm Ian Williams, sitting in for Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The United Nations World Food Programme is the largest international food aid organization in the world. Its 5,000 humanitarian workers direct emergency and development operations that benefit seventy-five million people in eighty countries. Recently, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of humanitarian crises worldwide. As a consequence, food insecurity among civilian population is on the rise. Countries like Albania, Sudan, Angola, among others, are dependent on international food aid. With the number of conflicts rising, can the international agencies and donors keep up food distribution for the masses of hungry people?

Our guest today is Catherine Bertini, Executive Director of the World Food Programme. Joining me to talk with Ms. Bertini is Judith Miller of the *New York Times* and Evgueni Menkes of *RIA "Novosti"*.

Ms. Bertini, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

BERTINI: Thank you.

WILLIAMS: One account I read recently said that there were no less than sixteen United Nations agencies involved in disaster relief and you, for example, the World Food Programme as a sort of subsidiary or attachment or partner of the Food and Agriculture Organization, could you explain how you are different from the Food and Agriculture Organization and what part you can play in harmonizing among sixteen different agencies. What do you do that the relief -- the refugees agency does not do, for example?

BERTINI: Good question, Ian. First of all, the World Food Programme was created in 1963 and it was created as an agency initially to take advantage of surplus commodities available in donor countries, in developed countries, and distribute them to poor people in poor countries, primarily for development. We were created as a part of FAO and the UN -- it was a joint ownership, parentage, so to speak. By now, however, we have evolved quite differently into first of all, an independent agency much like UNICEF or United Nations Development Programme, and also we're an agency with an extremely large budget. We're totally voluntarily funded but last year, for instance, we raised some

1.7 billion US dollars which, I think, is the largest in the System and we also evolved into an organization to get food to hungry people not just in development but also in the case of emergencies and refugee programmes. We have a very strong Memorandum of Understanding with the UN High Commissioner on Refugees which works well in that we provide all the food for refugee populations. So we work very closely with the UNHCR. They count on us to provide the food and then we work with them in terms of distributing the food in refugee camps and elsewhere and we work also with many, many NGOs in this process. The Food and Agriculture Organization continues to exist, continues to share with the UN some overall parental responsibilities but the FAO handles technical matters, research, a lot of broad issues relative to food safety, and we work together on assessments of disasters, for instance, and food aid needs, but the World Food Programme is the one UN food aid agency.

MILLER: Turning to the disaster that I think is on most people's minds at the moment at least here in the United States and in the west is, of course, Kosovo. Can you give us an assessment right now of the food shortage situation and how your Organization is trying to meet that and whether or not you can meet the need given your current stocks and difficulties in distributing that food?

BERTINI: Yes, the World Food Programme are already well involved in the region we were phasing down our programme that was initially based in Bosnia for the entire of Former Yugoslavia and we have programme already in place to be serving some of the refugees who would cross the border from Kosovo. We've, of course, expanded immediately. We now have enough food and the way to serve for the next few months for refugees coming across the border and we have been very – we have been sending food to the refugees who have crossed the border almost immediately upon their arrival in Albania or Macedonia and we are confident that we can continue to do that. It has to be ready-to-eat food because people don't have access to kitchens or to process to cook but the bread that we've seen in so many different television news stories, for instance, has been bread cooked by local bakeries but with wheat flour that's coming through WFP. So we've been serving all the refugees coming across the border and we can continue to do that. There's not a food problem, hasn't been. However, the bigger problem, we think, is the problem of the people still in Kosovo and we are not operating within Kosovo. No one really is except for now some initial aid provided by the Greeks and with the Swiss working with

them. So we're trying very hard to find how we can reach people in Kosovo who have left their homes and have no access to food.

MILLER: Do you have any idea of how many people we're talking about and what their food situation is at the moment?

BERTINI: The numbers fluctuate quite a lot and there are different estimates depending on who you ask – anywhere from 400,000 to 800,000 people are the estimates. Where they are is not well-known because most of these people have left their homes and they do not want to be found and of course one has to know where they are in order to try to serve them even if it were safe and appropriate to try to reach them. We're trying every way we can to try to reach those people. We have not yet come up to a way that says that.

MENKES: So it is not possible to say whether your operations target all the possible groups of refugees in the area.

BERTINI: We do target all the refugees and the technical definition of a refugee is someone who has crossed the border from one country to the next so anyone who is a refugee is going to be fed. It's the displaced people, people without homes inside Kosovo who we cannot reach at this time.

MENKES: What about the situation in Yugoslavia itself with the half million Serbs who migrated there from other Former Yugoslav Republics?

BERTINI: Well, the World Food Programme has been phasing out of the Former Yugoslavia with the exception of Kosovo and some of the refugees who did cross the border and we will have to, at the proper time, look at whether or not we should do anything differently there. But we had working the phase we had at one point then involved in Serbia, in Bosnia, in Croatia, but fortunately in many of those areas, people no longer need food aid assistance.

WILLIAMS: That sort of raises an interesting point because food is politics and part of warfare nowadays for example and there are sanctions on Iraq. Do you have operations inside Iraq to feed the people that the UN, from one point of view at least, is trying to starve?

BERTINI: The World Food Programme is a humanitarian agency and we reach people all throughout the world regardless of where they happen to live. What kind of politics are involved on a government to government level is not important to us. We need to reach people. We do have a programme in Iraq, it's targeted to the vulnerable

groups – the children under five, pregnant women, and women who are feeding their baby, breastfeeding. We also manage the Food for Oil monitoring system in Iraq and in Northern Iraq we actually work with NGOs to distribute the food directly.

MENKES: I wanted to follow-up what Ian has just asked about food being used as a weapon. You have been running your Organization for seven years. Did you have a chance to see any cases when this happened, this immoral concept was realized in fact? Could you give us some examples?

BERTINI: Well, again, we target – when we get going to a country, we target the most vulnerable people, people who have been cut-off from food. So whether it's Sudan or North Korea or Iraq or the Central American countries affected by hurricane Mitch, whether it's war, whether it's natural disaster, we target the people who are most in need of food and then we get the food to them. We have a lot of monitors to follow the food flow to make sure it gets to the right people and it's critically important to us to be able to ensure to the donors that this happens. So is it sometimes problematic? Sure, it's problematic for instance in outside Rwanda when there were people in some of the camps who were military people who was potentially a problem. We had to fly our food into Sudan because it is not possible for us to be able to drive the food in because of the war going on, because our staff won't be safe, because the food can be easily misdirected. So we fly the food, the most expensive way to move food. We drop it from the back of the air plane and we have staff, really brave staff who live temporarily in different locations throughout the country and they go out to organize with the local population before the food drops to manage it as well as possible. Somalia was another example where there were certainly problems in trying to assure that the food was going to the right people and back in 1992, we were cut-off from many different parts of the country because it's just was not secure to move food, we would lose as much food as we distribute it. But in that case our Operation Restore Hope really did restore the health and well-being of the people by allowing us to move food through the country.

MILLER: Your Organization recently assured an appeal, an emergency appeal on behalf of Sudan. Can you tell us a little bit about the response to that appeal and whether or not food is reaching in fact civilians as opposed to the various militias and people who are fighting there?

BERTINI: The Sudan appeal for food is right now about sixty percent funded so

we still very much need additional aid and I think the way we've set up the pipeline, as we call it, which is the process to move food through to be sure that there is no cuts in the process so that everyday people receive food. The pipeline is full until July but we really need additional donor contributions to be able to keep that pipeline totally full for the rest of the year. What we do in Sudan, we feed people throughout the country. We operate out of airports in Khartoum, in Kenya, as far as Southern Sudan and also in the central part of the country and we fly food into many places. There are some places where we can get in on the surface, but mostly we fly. We have more monitors per person in Sudan than in any other country in order to assure to the donors that the food is going to those most in need.

WILLIAMS: One of the things that was mentioned about Somalia — the question is the world is not short of food, but there are a lot of distribution difficulties for economic and political reasons and for example, one of the things that was said about Somalia was that the inrush of free food actually helped exacerbate things because it knocked the bottom out of the local agricultural market — I meant that farmers, the local farmers and food producers can get prices and was one of the reasons which contributed to the banditry and the use of food as a commodity and a weapon in the area. Do you look at the economic aspects like this?

BERTINI: Well, we also get at the economic aspects and before we start, we do an analysis and that's when the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization work together for instance to see what food is really needed, not only what foods is needed for the people but what food is available in the market so that we don't displace the market and I think Somalia is such a different case that it's hard to say that most of our programmes or even many of our programmes are like Somalia because of really the lack of government and the systemic rules there which don't seem to be followed in terms of basic operating procedures. So I think Somalia is an exception and it was not a happy experience and unfortunately it's still not in the shape where people can feed themselves because we still continue our programme in Somalia even though there are, again, still areas of the country where we cannot access. But I think to your point — the issue about access to food is really the key point and the fact that there are still over 800 million people in the world who can't access food, they don't have the income to be able to access food or they're cut off from food economically or because of some other

disaster and that's really the big problem – not how much food is available but how those people can have access to food. It's not only a question of how much the World Food Programme can move in because even though we are the largest food aid agency in the world as you said and we move forty percent of the world's food aid, even if we move a hundred percent, we would not be reaching all 800 million people and it's really a question of economic development and a question of helping those people have enough ability to have access to food themselves.

WILLIAMS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Catherine Bertini, Executive Director of the World Food Programme.

MENKES: There is an old saying, a well known saying: "If you give a person some fish to eat, he or she will eat once. If you teach a person how to catch a fish, the person may use this to eat for the whole life." Apparently your Organization is doing both. But still out of these two tasks, what do you consider the more important or most important?

BERTINI: Well over the long-term of course, the second task is most important because if we're able to help people develop their own capacity to grow food and/or to have enough income to purchase food, then we will make a significant dent in not only decreasing hunger but on poverty level of many of these people. However, what we must do is to give people fish, as you say, to keep many people alive because people who have had – who have been forced out of their homes in Kosovo, for instance, or people who have lost everything because of the water that rushed down the river in Honduras, these people have no option other than to count on someone to help provide food to them hopefully for a short period of time but in the interim when they have left their homes or the homes have left them and until they've resettled somewhere else. So both of them are critically important but the second to the fact that it's key for all of us in the International Community help people be able to grow their own food is of primary importance.

MENKES: If I may still come back to the issue of the fact that hunger still afflicts one out of every seven people on earth, to what extent do you feel – is this a measure of success or unsuccessful operations of your Organization?

BERTINI: Well, I have to say actually that it's terrible if there's one person who is so hungry that they're malnourished and that they may be at risk of starvation and when you think about it, it's morally unacceptable that there are over 800 million people in this

state. But it's not totally a bad news story in that that number has actually decreased because even though population of the world has increased, the number of desperately hungry and poor people has actually decreased. So it's still an outrageous, unacceptable number but because primarily of economic development in Southeast Asia, in some countries in Africa, in Latin America, there are fewer people who are hungry.

MENKES: Are we going to see such a day when there's not a single hungry person on this planet? The work – your work as Head of this Organization, did it make you more optimistic or less optimistic?

BERTINI: I don't think in any of our lifetimes we're going to see a world with no hunger but it's certainly a goal to which we are committed to working.

MILLER: What about hunger that's the result of political choices. We have heard reports from North Korea that yes, there's a terrible, terrible famine there and malnutrition, shortage of food, but we've also heard that at the same time, the North Korean Government has made a choice to invest in other things – a large military, weapons of mass destruction, there's money for these, but not money for food. What is the responsibility of your Organization in a situation like that?

BERTINI: Well, unfortunately, if we didn't give countries food because we didn't like their priorities, there will be a whole lot more hungry people in the world and there are countries who have defence budgets and other budgets that are certainly higher than many people think they should be and there are certainly many countries who do not put anywhere near as much support for social welfare, for education, for other things that are important to the development of their population. So we use an advocacy role that we have to work with the governments of such countries, to talk to them about things that are important. It's important, for instance, do you have food, do you have programmes to feed children in school because if children are fed when they're growing, then they have more opportunities over the long term – they have more ability to learn, they do better in test scores, they come to school more often, they pay attention there, because they have food to eat. So school feeding is critical in countries throughout the world but we still have a long way to go to convince countries that this is the kind of programme that once you put in one's own budget and support because it really does impact on future of the whole country.

MILLER: Can you – just following up – tell us something specifically about the

situation as you know it in North Korea because you are one of the few agencies working there in a major way?

BERTINI: Yes. The food shortage in North Korea is as a result of really several years of having not enough food available within the country. North Korea does not grow enough food to feed all of its people but neither do South Korea. Many countries don't. And in those cases, of course, other countries trade and purchase food elsewhere and North Korea does not have as much capacity to do that. They have been relying on other allies – the Soviet Union and others – to send food into the country that is now no longer available and because every person who lives in North Korea relies on the government for his or her food, as the government have less food available, that's spread out to the individuals who have less food available. That is the cause essentially – a major cause – of the shortage along with some natural disasters along the way. So from the World Food Programme's perspective the job that we have been doing there has been critical because we have been sending food to children in schools especially young children and they have kitchens in the schools for children six and under so they have been able to feed those children hot meals every day which has made a critical difference in the lives of many children. We're sending snacks to older children in schools, we're sending food to hospitals and sometimes in the hospitals the only sustenance people get is the food because there's also a lack of medicine as well.

MILLER: And you're sure this is not being diverted to the military?

BERTINI: We have monitors in North Korea that follow this food, we know what's put on the ship, what comes off the ship, we have an agreement about what pellets of food go to which countries and our monitors check. We have five sub-offices outside Pyongyang with international staff members in it and we are confident that we are managing that food and it's going to the people that are in need.

WILLIAMS: One of the things which struck the most people as very appalling about the Kosovo situation was that so many people were surprised since this was a very well-advertised event in many senses. Do you have any type of early warning system or in conjunction with other agencies in the UN that say, "this disaster is likely to happen there and do you build up stocks in advance ready to ...

BERTINI: The World Food Programme has a good early warning system for natural disasters working with the Food and Agriculture Organization, with major donors

like USAID and the European Commission and we're able to track very well the potential. For instance with El Niño and all the suggestions, the El Niño was going to have a massive impact. We were able to pre-position food in different places. Some places like Indonesia and South America we needed that food. Other places like Africa, were not negatively impacted by El Niño and we did not need that pre-positioning. However in humanitarian disasters and I can point to Kosovo as well as to Rwanda back a few years ago, we are not always, as an International Community, as well-prepared.

WILLIAMS: Do you anticipate anywhere in particular? Do you have warnings of where to avoid in the near future?

BERTINI: Not yet, really – no neon signs flashing about what we should look for and what we should avoid but we do try to do our best. One of the reasons why we have a very quick response on emergencies we get food to people within 48 hours even if we didn't know that the disaster was going to happen, is that we have food in many of the regions because we have these strong development programmes all around the world. So that when we need food, for instance in hurricane Mitch, we can move food immediately from warehouses for development programme into the emergency operation. We have been able to do that all around the world.

MENKES: Ms. Bertini, in 1996 the *Times of London Magazine* named you one of the most powerful women in the world. How does it feel?

BERTINI: I don't think I did anything different or felt any differently from the day before that article or the day after that article.

MENKES: Now tell me maybe you remember who else were in this group of the most powerful women in the world. Maybe you had a feeling that some of this group is **the** most powerful woman in the world.

BERTINI: Well, certainly women that were heads of state or former heads of states were on that list. But one of the exciting things about being in the United Nations now is that, for instance, there are seven women who run UN agencies or are, in the case of Louise Fréchette, the Deputy Secretary-General. And it's also interesting that the agencies that the women are running are agencies that served primarily women or at least women to the largest extent. The UNICEF is headed by an American woman – Carol Bellamy, the population agency is headed by Nafis Sadik, the Refugee Agency by Sadako Ogata, the health agency now by Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Human Rights Commission

by Mary Robinson, the food programme and the Deputy Secretary-General. So it's very exciting to be part of a system in a process where there are many women in important decisions, making a difference in the lives of women and men around the world.

MILLER: Well, to be no more Mr. Nice Guy and Mr. Nice Woman here, what have you found most frustrating about working within the UN system or your current job? What troubles you the most?

BERTINI: The World Food Programme is a voluntarily funded agency. We get no dues from the UN. We have no dues from anyone else and we have to convince donors not only every year, but every month and for every project, that the project is worthwhile and that they should contribute and donors mean governments in our case. So it's constantly a fund-raising effort essentially and that is extremely difficult. It would be easier if there were some at least, some standard amounts of resources available so that as soon as an emergency arose, we could tap into those resources. But having said that, it also keeps us on our toes at the World Food Programme, because we have to be sure that we are extremely efficient and very effective because if we create a reputation among the donors for not being efficient and effective, for not having the low overheads that we have, or being able to get food quickly to people, then donors will be less interested in funding our work and I am very proud of our record and very dedicated staff and the efficiency in which they get food to hungry people worldwide.

WILLIAMS: As an American yourself, you could catch very briefly to fly unlike most of the other UN agencies and does Washington keep up with its pledges to the World Food Programme?

BERTINI: Washington -- US generally gives a third, about 35-33 percent of food and cash to the World Food Programme. Last year, the US gave half of the World Food Programme's budget of 1.7 billion. So the US is a very -- is **the** major contributor consistently to the work of WFP.

WILLIAMS: Is that in cash or kind?

BERTINI: Both.

MILLER: Can just I ask one more question?

WILLIAMS: Very, very brief.

BERTINI: Is Kosovo taking away from Sudan and the other food emergencies in the world?

BERTINI: The contributions continue for the other emergencies. However, we've borrowed staff temporarily to get us off the ground.

WILLIAMS: Okay, Ms. Bertini, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on **World Chronicle**. Our guest has been Catherine Bertini, Executive Director of the World Food Programme. She was interviewed by Judith Miller of the *New York Times* and Evgueni Menkes of *RIA "Novosti"*. I'm Ian Williams sitting in for Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.